NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5965 JULY 6, 1978
JOHN ROBERTS

O.A.U. SUMMIT-SPOTLIGHT ON SUDAN

ANNCR:

WHEN THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY SUMMIT OPENS IN KHARTOUM LATER THIS MONTH (7/17), CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE BODY WILL PASS FROM GABON'S PRESIDENT OMAR BONGO TO PRESIDENT JAA'FAR AL-NUMAYRI OF SUDAN. HERE WITH A BACKGROUND REPORT ON THE SUDANESE PRESIDENT AND HIS COUNTRY IS V.O.A. WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT JOHN ROBERTS.

VOICE:

SUDAN IS THE LARGEST COUNTRY IN AFRICA IN TERMS OF SIZE, AND IT IS ALSO A MAJOR PIECE IN A COMPLICATED POLITICAL JIG-SAW PUZZLE INVOLVING ITS NEIGHBORS. EVER SINCE 1971 WHEN COMMUNIST-SUPPORTED DISSIDENTS TRIED TO TOPPLE PRESIDENT NUMAYRI'S REGIME, HE HAS BEEN CLOSELY ALLIED WITH CONSERVATIVE AND WESTERN-ORIENTED COUNTRIES, PRINCIPALLY EGYPT, JUST TO THE NORTH, AND SAUDI ARABIA ACROSS THE RED SEA. BUT IN RECENT YEARS, WITH CHRONIC INSTABILITY IN NEIGHBORING CHAD AND ETHIOPIA, AND WITH INTERNAL POLITICAL PROBLEMS LINKED WITH ETHIOPIA AND LIBYA, PRESIDENT NUMAYRI HAS MOVED TOWARD PATCHING UP RELATIONS WITH HIS SOCIALIST-ORIENTED NEIGHBORS.

IN 1972, PRESIDENT NUMAYRI BROUGHT ABOUT A RECONCILIATION WITH REBELLING CHRISTIAN BLACKS IN THE SOUTH BY GIVING THEM A LARGE MEASURE OF AUTONOMY. THIS WAS ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE HELP OF THE THEN-EMPEROR HAILE SELASSI, AND THE STABILITY ALONG SUDAN'S SOUTHERN BORDER WITH ETHIOPIA IS STILL GREATLY DEPENDENT IN THE GOOD WILL OF THE PRESENT SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT IN ADDIS ABABA. THIS SITUATION HAS LED PRESIDENT NUMAYRIA

TO DRAW AWAY FROM HIS EARLIER TACIT SUPPORT OF ERITREAN REBELS TOWARD A MORE NEUTRAL POSITION.

AT THE SAME TIME, THE PRESIDENT HAS DEFUSED AN ANCIENT TRIBAL CONFLICT WITHIN SUDAN BY PERSUADING TO RETURN A RIVAL MUSLIM LEADER WHOM HE EARLIER HAD SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR LEADING AN ATTEMPTED COUP LAST SEPTEMBER. THE RIVAL IS SAUDIQ MAHDI, GREAT-GRANDSON OF THE MAHDI WHO DEFEATED THE BRITISH IN 1884. IN RETURN FOR THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL DETAINEES, SADIQ MAHDI AGREED TO DISARM AND REPATRIATE THOUSANDS OF HIS FOLLOWERS IN ETHIOPIA.

THIS RAPPROACHEMENT WAS ASSISTED BY LIBYAN LEADER MU-AMMAR QADHAFI. AND WITH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS NOW RESTORED BETWEEN LIBYA AND SUDAN, PRESIDENT NUMAYRI IS DEEPLY INVOLVED IN EFFORTS TO RECONCILE THE GOVERNMENT OF CHAD WITH THE FROLINAT REBELS IN THE NORTHERN PART OF THAT COUNTRY.

PRESIDENT NUMAYRI HAS BEEN ABLE TO BRING OFF THESE DELICATE MANEUVERS APPARENTLY WITHOUT UNDULY ALARMING EGYPT OR SAUDI ARABIA. EGYPT CONSIDERS SUDAN VITAL TO ITS INTERESTS IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, AND SAUDI ARABIA IS A MAJOR SUPPLIER OF FUNDS TO SUDAN'S TROUBLED ECONOMY. OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT THE SUDANESE PRESIDENT'S OBVIOUS DIPLOMATIC SKILLS WILL STAND HIM IN GOOD STEAD DURING HIS CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE O.A.U. WHICH, LIKE THE SUDAN, IS BESET BY TROUBLESOME POLITICAL DIVISION.

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